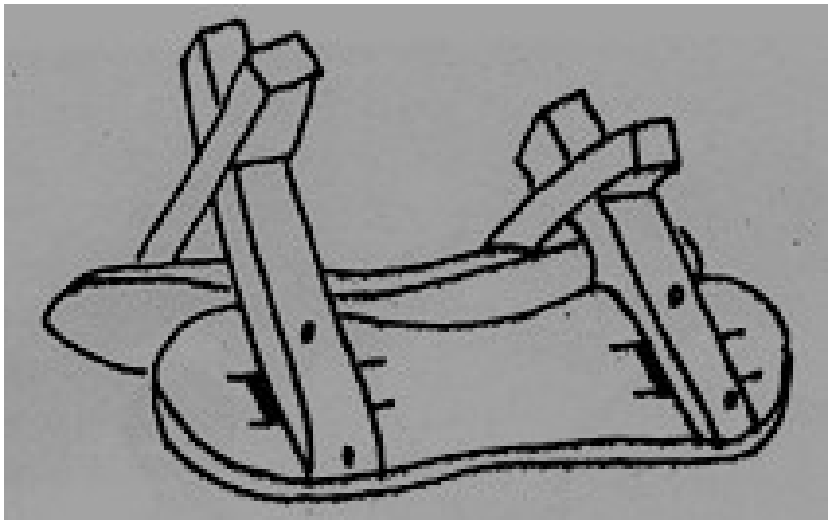
A Long-Term Survival Guide – How To Make Your Own Packsaddles:

Packsaddles are designed to allow pack animals to carry cargo and baggage, and are different from riding saddles. Packsaddles may be designed to fit horses, oxen, mules, lamas, camels, donkeys or goats. Once you know what the parts of a packsaddle are, and what they do, you can make your own improvised versions.



This is a basic wooden packsaddle frame.

Packsaddles have the following parts: Arches, which take the load off the animal's spine, Backboards, which spread the load along the muscles of the animal's back, and Rigging, which is harness used to position and secure the saddle on the pack animal. Some packsaddles also have quarter panels, that help to separate the saddle and load from the animal, and prevent chafing.

The rigging can include: Breeching, which is a strap that fits around the animal's rump, to stop the saddle from shifting forwards, A breastplate, which is a strap around the chest to stop the saddle from moving backwards, and a Crupper, which is a special strap that fits around the base of the tail (dock), to stop the saddle from moving forwards. The saddle is held in place by a girth, which is a strap that fits across the sternum (belly) of the animal. A second girth, called a balance girth, may be used to reduce saddle and load bouncing. This girth also fits around the belly, but is not fastened as tightly as the main girth. Donkeys and mules are often girthed using crossed girths of equal lengths. Crossed girths tend to prevent the saddle moving forward, as donkeys and mules lack high shoulders or withers. The girths should cross over on the sternum.

This donkey is wearing a saddle blanket and a basic packsaddle. Note how the rigging fits in place. Once you have the basic packsaddle harnessed to your pack animal, then any number of different kinds of containers or carriers can be rigged to the packsaddle. Look at this improvised carrier on the horse in the picture to the right; it holds two large milk jugs, with more room still available to lash extra stuff on board, if desired.

This is how the basic packsaddle looks, with all of the rigging laid out in place.

This pair of saddlebags will be strapped to the basic packsaddle. This set has extra bags added at front and rear. Here is a view of a loaded pack animal. The load can be protected from rain, by lashing a tarp over it.

Horses and mules make good pack animals; they can also pull an improvised travois, while carrying a rider.

Once equipped with a packsaddle, a horse can haul equipment and supplies into remote wilderness areas.

Here are the components needed to equip one pack animal for hauling loads, but each part could be improvised from available materials. The saddle blanket can be any blanket, moving pad, or folded cloth padding that you have available, or even an animal fur.

The arches of the frame can be made from curved or forked tree branches, or lumber.

The backboards can be made from planks, scrap wood, or sections of split logs, with padding added. The thick plastic from a plastic 55 gallon drum also makes good backboards. I like to make padding from the closed-cell foam rubber kneeling pads sold in the gardening section of most stores, but folded cloth, animal furs, woven grass mats, cloth bags full of grass, or anything similar can be used.

The speedy stitcher sewing awl is very useful when making improvised packsaddles and harnesses.

The rigging can be made from nylon strapping with quick-release hardware, but leather, rope, or improvised cordage can also be used. Ironically, the best material you might have available for making improvised rigging and harness (in a long-term survival situation) is seat belts salvaged from wrecked or abandoned motor vehicles.

A sewing awl, such as the speedy stitcher sewing awl, will make the job of making your own harnesses much easier. If you don't have a sewing awl, you can use a regular awl, icepick, or improvised substitute to make holes in the harness material. Heavy thread, cordage, or wire is then fed through the holes, to tie the straps together. An awl can be improvised from a nail, large needle, or heavy wire set into a wooden handle and then sharpened, or you can make them from sharpened bones, as shown below.

Shown here is a steel awl, useful for making holes in harness, and an improvised awl, made from a bone.

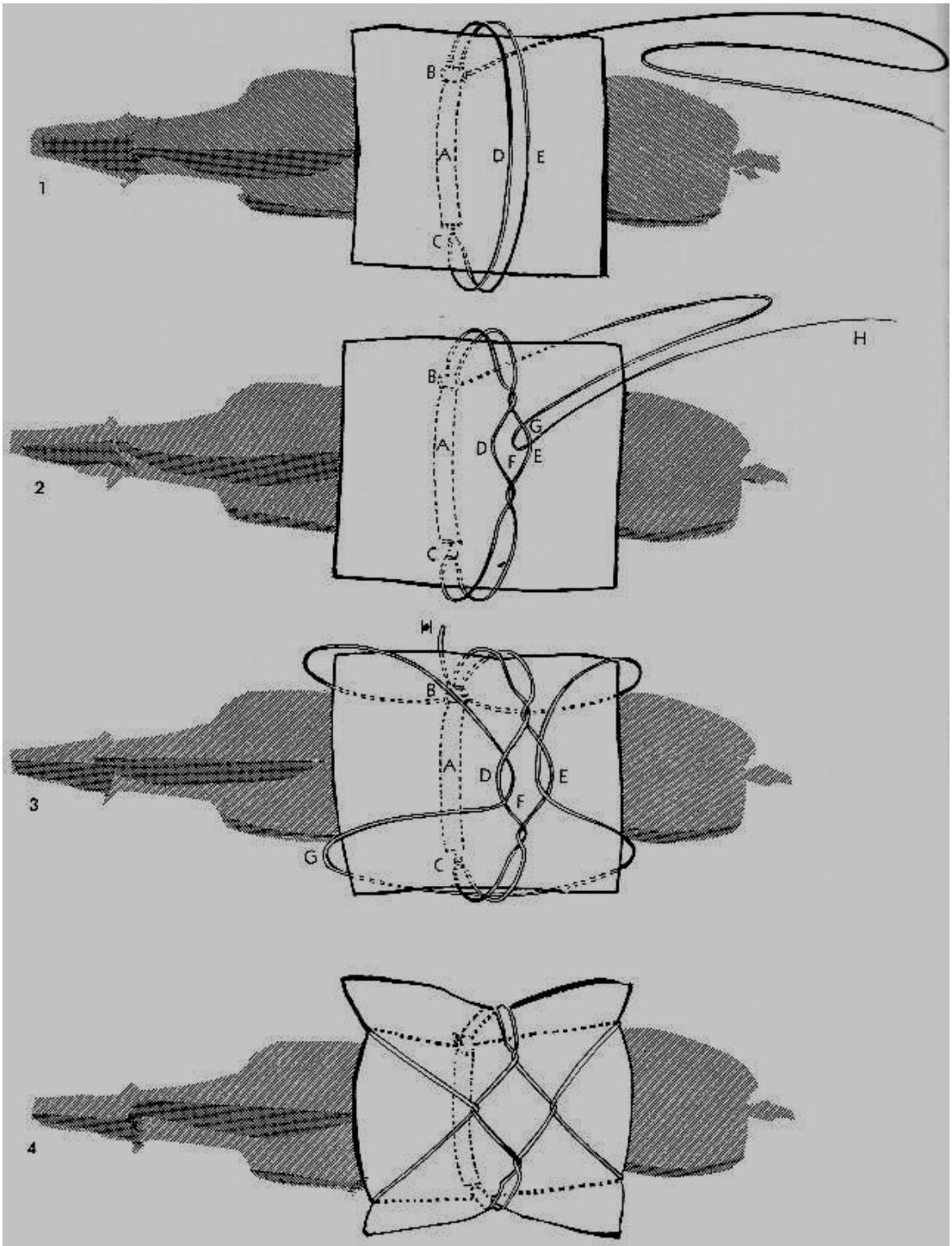
In a long-term crisis, you could run across many vehicles that were abandoned due to breakdowns, accidents, traffic jams, blocked roads, collapsed bridges or tunnels, or simply lack of fuel. Each such find is a potential source of harness material. Seatbelts have useful quick-release buckles and mounting hardware, and some vehicles may also contain tow straps, tie-down straps, rope, and many other handy materials.

Semi trucks and trailers (especially flat-beds) often carry huge amounts of tie-down straps, and enough heavy-duty tarps to make a fleet of covered wagons, or to outfit a large group with improvised tents, packs, or other gear. Tools and other heavy (but useful) items may also be left behind, as well as luggage that can be used as pack animal saddlebags.

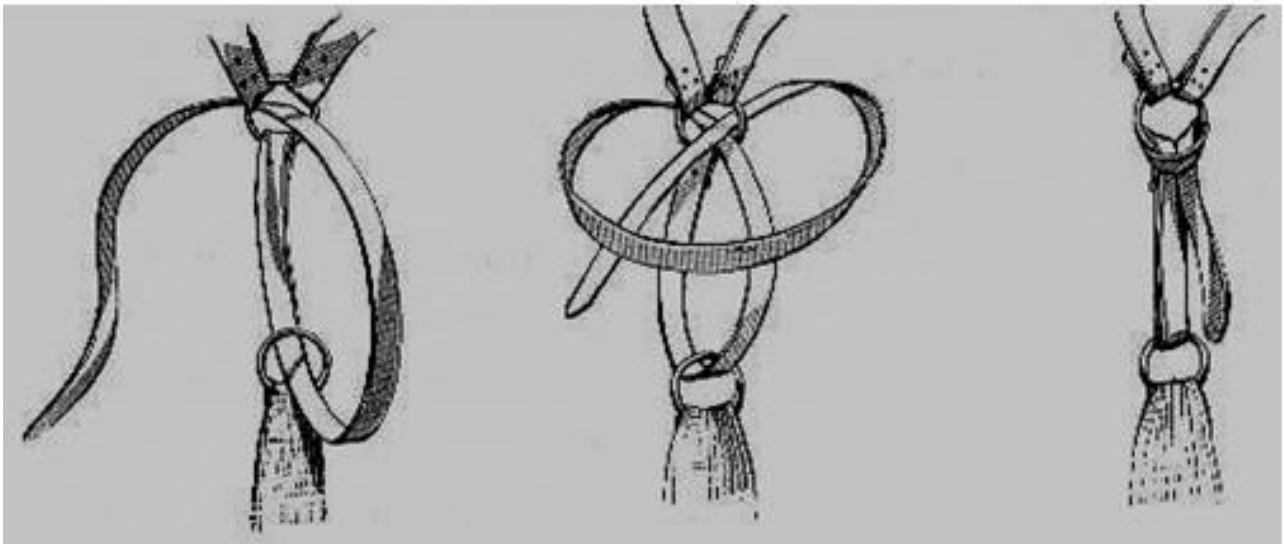
Most duffel bags will make good improvised saddlebags, but gear could also be carried in a wide variety of containers lashed to the packsaddle. Examples include suitcases, packs, sacks, boxes, barrels, plastic storage tubs, plastic trash cans, or even woven baskets. A rain cover can be made from a poncho, tarp, plastic sheeting, plastic trash bags, or home-made oilcloth, if you have any linseed oil (oilcloth is just any cloth soaked with linseed oil, then set out in the sun, where it will polymerize into a waterproof, flexible, plastic-like coating).

What you make the packsaddle from is less important than making sure that it is a good size fit for your pack animal, and that you don't overload your pack animal with too much weight. A llama or alpaca can carry a lot less weight than a donkey or pony, and they in turn can't carry as much as a large horse, mule, ox, or camel. A packsaddle that fits one of the larger pack animals will be too big for the smaller animals, and vice versa.

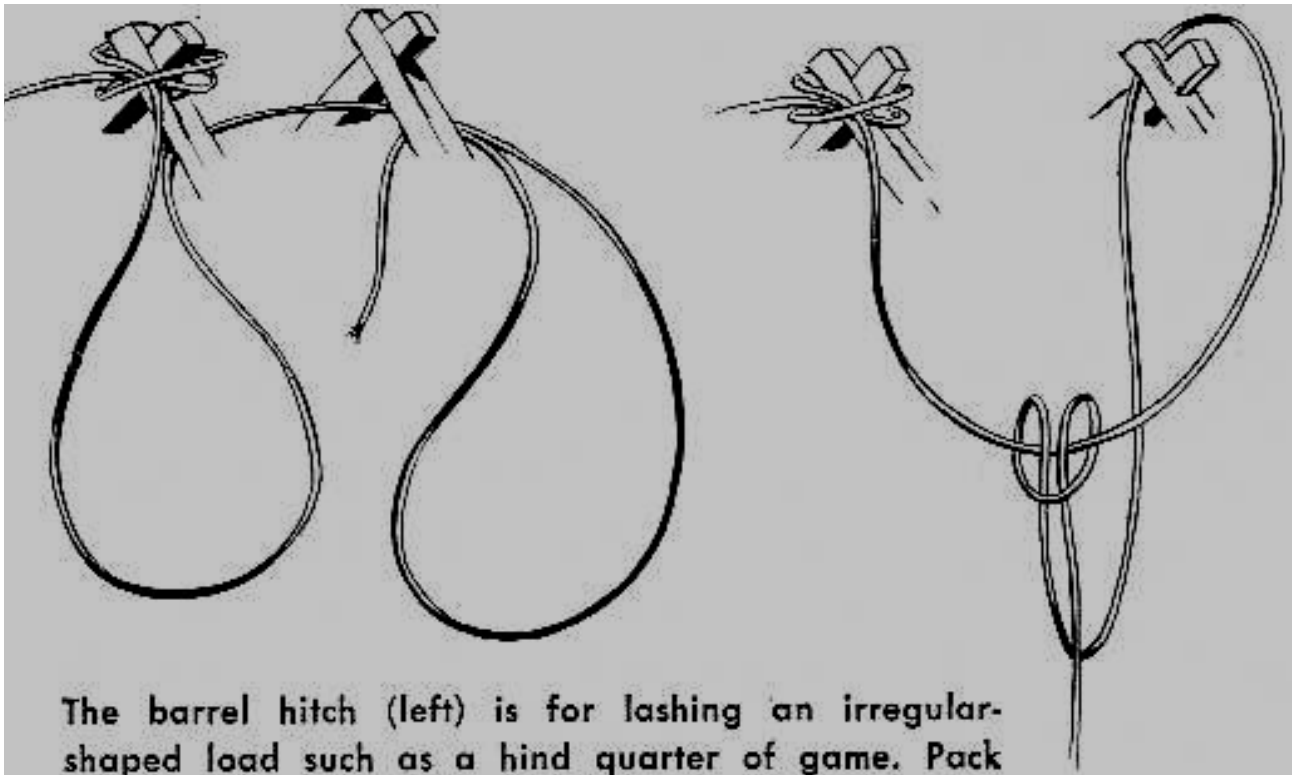
There are still areas in the US (and many other countries) where wild horses, burros, and other potential pack animals can be found. If you should find and capture yourself such a beast of burden, an improvised packsaddle will make them more efficient when hauling your equipment and supplies. Of course if you already own your own pack animals, then you are way ahead of the game, and you can make your equipment at your leisure.



The loaded pack saddle, covered with a canvas manta, is lashed down with the diamond hitch. 1. Tie the lash rope to the lash cinch A at ring B. Pass the rope over the load, under hook C, back over the load again, and through ring B forming loops D and E. 2. Twist parts D and E to form loop F, and pass middle of rope's working end, G, through this loop. 3. Pull loop G down and under the load, and loop end H under the load and pass it through ring B. Adjust loops thus formed under the load at each corner. Pull end H, tightening the entire lash, and tie to ring B. 4. Completed diamond hitch.

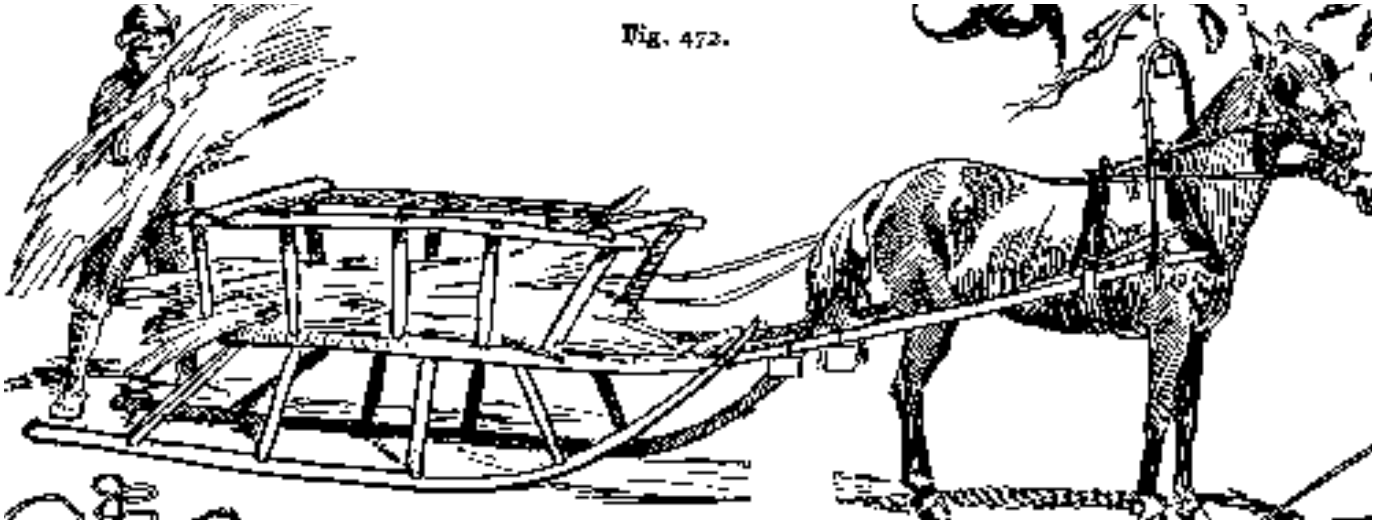


The latigo hitch is for tying the cinch strap to the ring on the loose end of the cinch. First, pass the strap through the cinch ring, then pass it back through its own ring, and finish off as shown.



The barrel hitch (left) is for lashing an irregular-shaped load such as a hind quarter of game. Pack boxes that are not equipped with sling ropes can be lashed to a sawbuck or a Decker pack saddle with the basket hitch (right).

Your pack animals can also carry equipment and supplies, using an improvised travois, like this example.



In snowy conditions, pack animals can haul anything from firewood to people, using crude sleds like this one.

See the woodcraft book, The Field and Forest Handy Book, by D C Beard, for instructions on how to build these types of home-made sleds, called Jumpers and Gummers. (Available for free download, at archive.com)